THE MINISTER OF DEFENCE (SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE): (a) to (d) The work of gauge conversion of Saharsa junction-Forbesgang and Sakri-Laukaha Bazaar-Nirmali section has been included in the Supplementary Budget 2003-04 of the Ministry of Railways at an anticipated cost of Rs. 355.81 crore, to be funded through defence funds. The foundation stones for the two sections had been laid on 8.2.2004 by the then Defence Minister. An outlay of Rs. 10 crore has been proposed for this work in Budget 2005-2006 of the Ministry of Railways.

Development of Hi-tech weapons system with US Co-operation

2981. SHRIMATI N.P. DURGA: Will the Minister of DEFENCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether US has offered co-operation in joint development of hi-tech weapons system, including missile defence shield;

(b) whether it is true that US offered to India F-18s and other nuclear technology as compensation to its sale of F-16s to Pakistan; and

(c) if so, the details thereof ?

THE MINISTER OF DEFENCE (SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE): (a) The United States (US) has conveyed its readiness to cooperate with India in the sale, production and joint development of defence equipment, including in areas of advanced defence technologies. This has included a limited interaction on missile defence.

(b) to (c) The US has responded to a Request for Information (RFI) for medium (below 20 tonnes) Multi Role Combat Aircraft (MRCA) clearing US manufacturers of F-16 and F-18 aircraft for the Request for Proposal (RFP). The US have also offered an energy dialogue which could include cooperation on nuclear energy for civilian use.

Replacement of Cheetah and Chetak helicopters

2982. SHRI RAMA MUNI REDDY SIRIGIREDDY: Will the Minister of DEFENCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is true that Cheetah and Chetak helicopters have become obsolete and are not able to address the surveillance system in high altitude regions;

(b) if so, whether Army has initiated any action to replace the aged Cheetah and Chetak helicopters; and

(c) to what extent Army has succeeded to configure Dhruv helicopter to high altitude requirements?

THE MINISTER OF DEFENCE (SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE): (a) A need has been felt to replace the existing Cheetah/Chetak fleet as they are of 1960s vintage and hence not suitably equipped for all weather and night operations in high altitude areas.

(b) Yes, Sir.

(c) Dhruv is presently powered with engine TM-333-2B2 of M/s Turbomeca, France, during the trial of which at high altitude in hot and cold weather conditions, the maximum altitude for take off and landing was demonstrated upto 5.95 Km pressure altitude. However, in order to meet the Army's need for operating Dhruv with additional pay load at higher altitude, a higher power engine named 'Shakti' is being co-developed by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited with M/s Turbomeca, France. The first flight of Dhruv with 'Shakti' engine is planned by the end of 2006.

Indo-France naval exercises

2983. SHRIMATI VANGAGEETHA: Will the Minister of DEFENCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that India and France have begun naval exercises off Kochi port;

(b) if so, the expenditure incurred thereon;

(c) whether Government signed any MoU with any other countries to begin naval exercises for the next 3 years; and

(d) if so, the details thereof?

THE MINISTER OF DEFENCE (SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE) (a) Indo-France Naval exercise was held off Kochi port from 27 February, 2005 to 7th March, 2005.

(b) Indian Navy has not incurred any extra expenditure during this exercise, other than the normal operational cost of the Indian ships involved in this exercise, which is estimated at Rs. 44 lakh only.